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On Behalf of the National Association of State Foresters

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Subcommittee on Forest and Forest Health

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Wildland Fire Issues Related to Forest and Forest Health

**Introduction**

As the Assistant Director of the Florida Division of Forestry of the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, I am pleased to have been invited here today to testify. Over the past thirty-five years, I have been involved in wildland fire management across this nation serving on the National Wildfire Coordination Group, National Fire Weather Advisory Group, National Association of State Foresters, Southern Group of State Foresters, and Florida Fire Chief's Association committees. Most recently, I had the privilege of serving as the Eastern State Representative on the development of the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan.

Wildland fire management is not a regional phenomenon, it is a national problem. The objective of protecting the public and the resources are the same with similar issues but there are also some distinct differences.

As large fires continue to burn across the west, I am here today to present the eastern state perspective to the wildland fire problem. The one thing that must be remembered is that no matter where or when, if there is major fire activity the fire community pulls together and shares resources to help those with the problem. As an example, today there are numerous state and local government firefighters from the east providing assistance to the west.

**Florida's Fire Management Challenges**

The Florida Division of Forestry protects nearly 26 million acres of land. One of the greatest challenges is the diversity of the landowners and the differences in their land management objectives. We must deal with the wildland fire issues on lands owned by federal agencies, state agencies, county governments, city governments, corporations and private citizens. We are similarly situated with many other states in the southeast. Indeed, protecting private property from wildland fire is a major challenge for wildland fire agencies in the east. Our national wildfire agenda cannot be dictated by federal land management or ownership.

As part of the Division's total wildland fire management program, we issue around 68,000 prescribed burning authorizations to various landowners for agricultural and silvicultural purposes burning approximately 2 million acres annually. In addition we respond to an average of 5,700 wildland fires burning over 225,000 acres annually. The local fire departments respond to about that many more smaller wildland fires that we never have to take action on.

The Division has the responsibility for prevention, detection, and suppression of wildland fires within the state. We are not funded or equipped anywhere near the level needed to do the job in a satisfactory manner during years with above normal fire occurrence. Because of the ever increasing population and their desired living styles, all the fire agencies of Florida must be able to come together and work together on any given day as there are only about ten days in any year that the division does not respond to fires some where in the state. Our work to deliver rural community fire assistance funding, national fire plan funds and federal

excess property to the rural fire departments is critical to our ability to handling fire under normal conditions. This expands to bringing in resources from the Southeastern Forest Fire Compact and, if needed, additional resources through our agreements with the U.S. Forest Service and the Interior Agencies when conditions become extreme.

The last four years found Florida much like the west today, under anything but normal fire conditions. The extreme droughts, coupled with severe fire weather, produced fire behavior conditions that were almost impossible to deal with. The wildland urban interface issues we face, even on small fires, demand tremendous resources, and when you are experiencing 100 new fire starts per day, you soon run out of resources with which to respond. The fire conditions were so extreme that we were forced to evacuate communities and even an entire county. Our 1998 fire season mirrored what happened in Colorado and Arizona this year. It is not uncommon to lose or damage a home or two in the urban interface but during these four years it was a weekly event to lose structures. The real danger was firefighter safety. We had personnel taking great risks to save communities.

The fuel loads and conditions in the Eastern Coastal Plains are such that if you don't prescribe burn an area every three years you lose the hazard reduction effect. The effort to utilize our fuels mitigation teams to reduce the risk to communities is extremely complex when working on non-governmentally owned lands. We have many more communities at risk other than those adjacent to government-owned lands. By necessity we have developed a risk assessment that allows for developing a prioritization for treatment. There is legislation in Florida that allows us to treat private lands as long as the owner does not file an objection. This gives us an advantage over some states when it comes to fuel hazard reduction and mitigation efforts. It is important to note, however, that if communities at risk were required to be adjacent to federal lands (as some have proposed), most landowners in Florida would not receive the assistance they need, and our fire hazards would escalate.

We are starting to see benefits from the FIREWISE Community Program. Counties are adopting ordinances and for the first time one county placed the firewise principles into its revision of the County Comprehensive Plan. This plan has not been approved by the State Division of Community Affairs but should be soon. That will set the stage for others to follow and encourage firewise development in the state. Future developments must be built with an understanding of wildland fire and its role in the vegetative community where the development is being built. We cannot just build and expect the fire service to be able to protect the residents.

### **Wildland Fire is a National Issue**

The Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1978 recognized fire as a national problem and provided direction to the Secretary of Agriculture to provide assistance in the prevention and control of rural fires to non-federal forestlands. You only have to look at the fire activity over the past year to see how that national direction was reached. There was major fire activity in Florida, Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, South Carolina, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania as well as now in the west. Earlier they predicted drought conditions for the Northeast this fall. This could produce fires in that portion of the country like that of the Long Island Fire.

In addition, the year-to-date statistics show that, as of July 8, nearly half of all the acreage burned (1.5 million acres) has burned on lands under the protection of state and local agencies. By contrast, the next largest acreage burned so far this year (860,000 acres) is on USDA Forest Service lands. The Interior agencies (BIA, BLM and the Fish and Wildlife Service) account for another 200,000 to 350,000 acres each. These facts highlight to what extent wildfire is an interagency issue that requires excellent coordination among federal, state and local fire agencies. The National Fire Plan is an important vehicle to help achieve this goal.

When the conditions become right for extreme fire behavior no portion of the country is immune from the

devastation of wildland fires. There seems to be a tendency to want to address wildland urban interface issues on lands only adjacent to federal lands. I feel strongly that to do so is to neglect the vast majority of other communities throughout the nation that may be in areas of equal or higher risk. There is little federal land in the east for the urban interface to be adjacent to, yet there are numerous subdivisions, homes, businesses and communities at extreme risk. There is an obligation to provide assistance to these citizens that far exceed the numbers of Americans and communities in the Western United States adjacent to federal lands.

### **The National Fire Plan Addresses All Lands**

I do not disagree that there is a need for fuel hazard reduction in the west, including brush removal, thinning, harvesting, and where it can be safely used, prescribed fire. But these activities cannot stop or start at some magical line. Such treatments should be easier where federal agencies own and manage the land and it is easier to seek funds to treat these lands. However, there is also an obligation to give consideration to the other role of the U.S Forest Service, to provide assistance on non-federal land. Wildland fire cannot distinguish between untreated fuels on federal lands and those on non-federal lands, nor can it identify property boundaries. The health of our forestlands is in jeopardy. There must be a new and different approach to returning them to more natural conditions that also recognize the dynamic nature of renewable natural resources.

There is a need to strengthen the preparedness and hazard reductions capabilities of the nation, not just focus on one portion. If we neglect the east, at some point the fuels, weather and drought conditions will again line up and wildland fires will be devastating beyond belief in the Eastern United States. The east has no vast areas where it will be appropriate or beneficial to allow fires to go unattended or unmanaged and all new fires will need immediate attention. If left to burn, they will be destructive in loss of homes and, potentially, lives in highly populated areas.

There are countless acres of land in private ownership that have forest health issues just as severe as those on federal lands. The current markets and recent closures of pulp and paper mills will only reduce landowners' ability to remove smaller diameter products. If we are to be successful at reducing hazardous fuels, we must find ways to utilize the materials. This is one of the goals of the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan.

The National Fire Plan and the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy, along with the recently adopted implementation plan, must come together at some point. The 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy recognizes the need to collaboratively develop successful solutions. In the east, most of the federal natural resource-based agencies having responsibility for wildland fire work in close cooperation with state forestry agencies. If we are to be successful nationally at reducing the threat and damage from wildland fire, it will be necessary to provide the help to strengthen this partnership.

The wildland fire that took place in Florida and Georgia on the Okefenokee Swamp provides a prime example of what can be done with a total fire management program like ours in Florida. The understanding and cooperation between federal and state agencies and private landowners as the fire-use team managed the fire could only happen because of years of working together on wildland fire suppression, building trust and understanding for improved overall fire management.

### **Federal Excess Personal Property: Transfer for Fire Fighting**

In addition to the issues I have already discussed, state forestry agencies face one critical problem which requires your help. For years, state forestry organizations have made excellent use of the Federal Excess Property Disposal Program, managed by the U.S. Forest Service. This program has helped both state and local fire agencies to obtain equipment and materials that allowed for the development of additional wildland fire fighting capabilities that would not have been otherwise available. The main thrust of these local fire fighting units and their role in the national fire program is their capacity for quick initial attack to

keep fires small. Without these local units, the nation would face significantly more fires that would reach national attention.

The priority for screening and acquisition of excess property by state forestry organizations is constantly being reduced. This leads to both less equipment and poorer quality of equipment being available. The “exchange sales” concept for federal disposal that is currently preferred by the Department of Defense may sound good on the surface, but it depletes the availability for vehicles that can go into the fire program.

Many state forestry agencies’ aviation programs rely primarily on federal excess aircraft. This is especially true of the helicopter programs. Without the ability to obtain federal excess helicopters, many states, including Florida, would have little or no aerial fire suppression capability. These are critical to saving structures when working urban interface fires.

In many states, budgets are being sharply reduced, making this a critical time to strengthen the ability to utilize federal excess equipment in the wildland fire program and to help keep the loss of service to a minimum. To fix this problem, we need language that would move the Forest Service/States screening potential higher on the priority agency list. This simple change would improve the ability of the states to acquire, repair and prepare equipment for use by rural fire departments. To maintain this vital program, NASF believes it is imperative that the U.S. Forest Service and states maintain eligibility to acquire Federal Excess Property for distribution to local fire departments.

This committee could help by urging your colleagues to adopt language in the Defense Appropriations Bill that I have attached at the end of my statement.

### **Fire Assistance to Communities Needs Federal Funding**

Forest communities also need your assistance. Earlier this year Congress passed, and the President signed, the 2002 Farm Bill. This new law includes a critical program for Community and Private Lands Fire Assistance (CPLFA) that was initially funded with \$35 million under the National Fire Plan in FY 2001. It was funded again in FY 2002 at a reduced level of \$ 12.5 million. However, no funding was included in the President’s budget request for FY 2003 because, at the time, the program was not authorized by Congress.

Inclusion of the CPLFA in the Forestry Title of the 2002 Farm Bill is a significant step forward for community fire protection, but it can only help if Congress provides the necessary funding. The Farm Bill authorizes funding of \$35 million per year from 2002 through 2007 and continued funding thereafter in ‘such sums as are necessary’. However, neither the House nor Senate FY 2003 appropriation bills for Interior and Related Agencies currently provide this funding.

The CPLFA in the Farm Bill provides for cooperation between the Secretary of Agriculture and State Foresters to: (1) aid in wildfire prevention and control; (2) protect communities from wildfire threats; (3) enhance the growth and maintenance of trees and forests that promote overall forest health, and (4) ensure the continued production of all forest resources through the conservation of forest cover on watersheds, shelterbelts, and windbreaks. The program would augment Federal projects that establish landscape level protection from wildfire; expand outreach and education programs to homeowners and communities about fire prevention; and establish space around homes and property of private landowners that is defensible against wildfires. At a time when fire constitutes such a significant threat to communities, we must now continue the State-Federal partnership initiated through the National Fire Plan and 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy by funding the CPLFA. Therefore, I encourage the Chairman and Members of the Committee to help secure funding for the CPLFA when the House completes its work on the FY2003 Interior Bill.

### **Conclusion**

The length and severity of the current fire season as it moves across the nation urgently demonstrates the need for a collaborative approach to dealing with the fire management program. The National Association

of State Foresters is committed to working as a full partner with our federal counterparts to address and increase our role and responsibility for wildland fire on a national level and provide assistance where needed .

The challenges that lie ahead necessitate that the National Fire Plan and the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy must be pulled together and addressed with the realization that wildland fire is a National issue and crosses boundaries well beyond that of federal land ownership. On behalf of the NASF, I thank you, Chairman McInnis, for your support in the establishment of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council and for recognizing the need to include states as full partners in the council. This council, with representation from the primary federal agencies with wildland fire responsibility and with the addition of Governors, the National Association of State Foresters, Counties and Tribes, is a step toward achieving a National Total Fire Management Program. The council members must remember that while they represent their own agencies, they are expected to serve as statesmen and address the national problem-- not limit their consideration to issues within or adjacent to their agencies boundaries.

The definition of Wildland/Urban Interface must be based on a set of conditions that exist on or near forestlands nation-wide, regardless of landownership. The concept that you are not at risk unless you are adjacent to federal lands is counterproductive and only adds to the complexity for those states trying to mitigate the wildland fire problem where there is little federal land.

We must strive to strengthen the state and local fire departments' ability to obtain and utilize Federal Excess property. This is the backbone of the fire program for many of the small rural volunteer fire departments. Without Federal Excess Property vehicles, the volunteer firefighters across the country would have no vehicles in the department and thus no fire department. I would urge you to consider making this program a priority for the U.S. Forest Service and support language that would raise the screening level for state forestry agencies. This will strengthen both the state and local fire department programs.

It is critical that funding be secured for Community and Private Lands Fire Assistance. The state and local volunteer fire departments understand the importance of having funding available to improve protection capabilities and expand and promote outreach to the communities we protect. The mitigation work and education needed to improve fire tolerant design in residential developments is essential in the future if we are going to reintroduce fire into our forest and maintain the forest in a healthy condition while protecting our citizens.

An investment in strengthening the response capabilities of state and local agencies not only improves the wildland fire effort but strengthens the first response capabilities for other emergencies. In most cases, these agencies are called to respond to emergencies such as hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, oil spills, domestic disturbances, etc. You receive a multiplier effect on the protection you are providing the citizens and communities of the nation when you help build the capabilities of the state and local agencies.

The National Association of State Foresters realizes that a healthy forest condition is the primary key to reducing the wildland fire problem. The return of fire to fire-adapted ecosystems in a safe and prudent manner will reduce the threat of unwanted wildland fire intrusion into the wildland urban interface. We realize this is not possible every where and that even under the best vegetative management programs when the conditions become right for extreme fire behavior, there will be fires that reach catastrophic proportion. The best that we can do is to maintain a balance that makes those instances an exception rather than the norm, as it seems to be with the conditions of the Nation's forest today. Even under such conditions, however, I should point out that the National Fire Plan has already achieved success in providing better initial attack capabilities (through funding and firefighting training) this year than we have had in years past.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on this extremely important subject. I will be happy to entertain any questions you may have.

**Attachment**

- (a) Transfer Authorized. – (1) Notwithstanding any other provision of law and subject to subsection (b), the Secretary of Defense may transfer to the USDA Forest Service personal property of the Department of Defense including aircraft and aircraft parts, that the Secretary determines is –
  - a. Suitable for use by the Forest Service for use in the Federal Excess Personal Property program for rural and wildland fire-fighting; and
  - b. Excess to the needs of the Department of Defense.
- (b) Conditions for Transfer. – The Secretary of Defense may transfer personal property under this section only if –
  - a. The property is drawn from existing stocks of the Department of Defense;
  - b. The recipient accepts the property on an as-is, where-is basis;
  - c. The transfer is made without the expenditure of any funds available to the Department of Defense for the procurement of defense equipment; and
  - d. All costs incurred subsequent to the transfer of the property are borne or reimbursed by the recipient.
- (c) Consideration. – Subject to subsection (b)(4), the Secretary may transfer personal property under this section without charge to the recipient agency.